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There are many barriers within the NYS mental health system & I am happy to see that many of these are being addressed in the 2023 proposed plan. One of the issues that I would like to highlight in this letter is the low and unsustainable wages that social workers are paid.

As you likely know, a social worker or counselor position requires a bachelor or master's degree. When comparing salaries to other positions, it is apparent that the difference is unjust. This not only diverts many from entering the field, it drives current employees to find other work (that they are often overqualified for) while also negatively affecting client care.

For example, a search on Indeed shows the below wages offered to Registered Nurses, who typically require a bachelor's or completion of a nursing program. These examples are excluding higher-paid travel and per diem positions. Many of these salaries include sign on bonuses that are listed on the site as up to \$25,000.

- \$87,500+ yearly offered by Kaleida Health/Highpointe on Michigan
- \$37.06 - \$48.64 hourly offered by Kaleida Health/Millard Fillmore Suburban Hospital
- \$30 - \$35 hourly offered by UBMD Family Medicine
- \$75+ hourly offered by Med-Cor
- \$36+ hourly offered by Northgate Healthcare Facility
- \$70,000 – 78,000 yearly offered by Family Choice of New York
- \$35 - \$52 hourly offered by Niagara Falls Memorial Center

Below is also a list of entry-level positions that offer higher or comparable wages to social work positions.

- \$40,602 yearly offered by Geico for a Sales Representative position
- \$25 hourly offered by Med-Scribe, Inc. for Inbound Call center/Hospital Associate (Associate's required)

- \$70,000 - \$90,000 yearly offered by Confidential for Mortgage Call Center Manager (experience required)
- \$15 - \$22 hourly offered by Recovery Management Solutions for Experienced Collection Agent
- \$19 hourly offered by Independent Health for Customer Service Representative (Hybrid)

Lastly, listed below are social work and counselling wages taken from Indeed in the Buffalo area.

- \$19 - \$22 hourly offered by PATH Enrichment Center for Child and Family Advocate (bachelor's required)
- \$26 hourly offered by Seneca Health Care Center for Social Worker (master's required)
- Up to \$18.09 hourly offered by Elderwood for Social Worker (minimum bachelor's + 1 year experience)
- \$16.23+ hourly offered by Altamont Program for Case Manager (bachelor's required)
- \$20.50 - \$27.00 hourly offered by Northpointe Council, Inc. for Counselor (master's required)

Many of the positions listed on Indeed offer wide ranges, with the higher pay reserved for individuals that have obtained their LCSW or LCSW-R, which requires at least 3 years of field experience supervised by a LCSW, training courses, and other fulfillments.

While it is unfortunate that all positions in the mental health field are underpaid, I can speak more personally to the specific issue of counselors in the crisis intervention field not being fairly compensated. Crisis intervention jobs not only generally have less favorable hours, on-call duties & require to be constantly on-the-go, they also come with an increase of risk and harm. Crisis intervention entails working with homicidal, suicidal, psychotic & the most dangerous individuals in the system. I know I personally have been in multiple situations where my safety has been at risk. I currently work with Endeavor Health Services' Buffalo Police Behavioral Health Team, where I am accompanied by officers for each encounter. Prior to this, I worked with Crisis Services' Mobile

Outreach Team, where we often did not have police protection.

Starting pay for crisis intervention counselors in the area range from approximately \$51,000 to \$52,000 annually. When I started at Crisis Services in 2020, the starting pay was approximately \$43,500 for a masters-level position & was not raised until extensive, aggressive Union negotiation in 2022. This is especially concerning, because crisis intervention is one of the most difficult and important jobs in the field. We are deciding who can remain safe in the community or whose being involuntarily transported to the hospital, along with de-escalating & working under chaotic circumstances. It is often difficult to hire quality candidates for these positions due to the especially low pay, leaving these important jobs to be filled by underqualified individuals while the qualified workers are taking jobs that pay \$20,000 more to sit in a comfortable office. This obviously, in turn, negatively affects the quality of client care.

I have personally witnessed negative effects that low wages have had on the crisis intervention field, leaving many individuals unable to access the help that they need due to low staffing leading to reduced hours & availability. I know that I, myself, have considered leaving this field with the lure of better pay in other fields, despite my passion for crisis counseling. Most positions that I qualify for offer higher pay than my current position, both in the mental health field & entry or lower-level positions in other fields.

We already work in a high-burn out field, but feeling unappreciated & struggling to pay bills adds additional stress. This current model is not sustainable when it is so easy to apply at a call center to make more money. Being adequately financially compensated for the important work that we do would be of great benefit to the mental health system, as a whole. I appreciate you taking time out of your day to read this.